



From AJR, **September 1994**

The 10 Best Books of Social Concern by Journalists

At least as far back as the penning of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" in 1776, American journalists have been trying to reform society as well as inform it...

*Book review by **Judith Paterson***

Judith Paterson is a professor at the University of Maryland College of Journalism.

At least as far back as the penning of Thomas Paine's "Common Sense" in 1776, American journalists have been trying to reform society as well as inform it. Here are my favorite books that aim to make a difference:

The Shame of the Cities

By Lincoln Steffens(1904)

This collection of essays first published in McClure's magazine by the leading turn-of-the-century muckraker exposes municipal corruption in St. Louis, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and reviews the partial success at cleaning up Chicago and New York. With careful documentation and high-toned prose Steffens names names and castigates America for creating institutions based on "graft and lawlessness..profit, not patriotism; credit, not honor; individual gain, not national prosperity; trade and dickering, not principle."

The Other America: Poverty in the United States

By Michael Harrington(1962)

In a bold foreshadowing of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, Harrington uses grim statistics and sound scholarship to reveal a volcano of poverty and desperation roiling beneath the surface of the affluent society. Though his big-government solutions and the tone of moral indignation are no longer fashionable, the problems he depicts still beg for solutions. His prediction that the black underclass would expand in the cities and its circumstances worsen makes him look like a prophet of doom crying in the wilderness.

The American Way of Death

By Jessica Mitford(1963)

In short sentences and purple prose this British-born, self-proclaimed child of the muckrakers throws the book at the funeral industry in America. Nobody escapes. Casket and vault makers, funeral directors, embalmers, cemetery and crematorium owners, trade associations, florists, clergymen: They're all a pack of knaves out to exploit and manipulate the bereaved out of their sanity as well as their savings. In the end, she provides a compendium of suggestions for outwitting the whole ghoulish tribe and returning to dust with dignity.

The Feminine Mystique

By Betty Friedan(1963)

Working from the New York Public Library and her dining room table, this little known housewife/magazine writer set the country on its ear by claiming that the post-World War II mystique that defined women solely as wives, mothers and housekeepers resulted in the crippling not only of women but of their children and husbands and the national economy as well. The women who read the book and said, "It changed my life," changed the face of American politics and family life for good.

Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape

By Susan Brownmiller (1975)

This groundbreaking study examines the practice of rape throughout history and condemns attitudes and laws the writer says condone it. Though her assertion that the threat of rape is "nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear" made many readers mad, her book changed both the way we punish the crime of rape and the way we treat and aid its victims.

Dispatches

By Michael Herr(1977)

Nearly 10 years before its publication, much of this book had already appeared as a series of essays in Esquire magazine. It was those essays, based on the month the reporter spent sharing the jungles of Vietnam with the "grunts," that gave the American public its image of Vietnam as a place America had no business being. The picture Herr painted remains: Vietnam was a spooky war in a spooky place driving young men to drugs and madness and serving no rational purpose.

And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic

By Randy Shilts(1987)

By 1987, Shilts had already spent five years covering the AIDS epidemic for the San Francisco Chronicle, which he called "the only daily newspaper in the United States that did not need a movie star to come down with AIDS" before deeming the epidemic a legitimate news story. The book spans the country, presents a cast of thousands and unfurls a horror story that sympathizes with the suffering of the afflicted and exposes the recalcitrance of the federal government, the stubbornness of the medical community and the ignorance of the public.

Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63

By Taylor Branch (1988)

This masterful piece of reporting and storytelling uses the life of Martin Luther King Jr. as a focal point for putting the causes and implications of the first nine years of the civil rights movement in a context of sociology, history and public policy. The story forces the reader to think deeply about the meaning of this country's flawed commitment to fairness and equal opportunity for all. In the end, King's life becomes a metaphor for the complexities and limitations of American life.

The Broken Cord

By Michael Dorris(1989)

This bestseller and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award introduced the public to the damaging set of birth defects caused by alcohol consumption by pregnant women. Though the effects of maternal drinking constitute the largest preventable cause of birth defects and mental retardation in the United States, at the time the book was written few people had heard of either fetal alcohol syndrome or the less severe fetal alcohol effect. Dorris wraps the facts about the affliction around the tragic story of its impact on his adopted American Indian son.

There are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*By Alex Kotlowitz(1991)*

During the summer of 1987, Kotlowitz decided to make a book out of his Wall Street Journal story about two brothers growing up in one of Chicago's worst public housing projects. By then the boys were living with the fallout from three generations of urban poverty, crime, violence, addiction, educational neglect and family disintegration. By the time their mother tells the reporter, "There are no children here. They've seen too much to be children," the reader knows it's true.

###

PHILIP MERRILL
COLLEGE of JOURNALISM[RETURN TO AJR.ORG](https://ajr.org)[ISSUE LISTS](#)